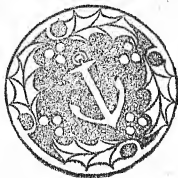




"AND NOW WE HAVE DONE OUR HOMAGE AND OFFERED
OUR GIFTS."

The BIRTHDAY of HOPE

By
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THE RECORD OF CHRISTIAN WORK

PREFACE



IN this little book I have told the story of a dream. It was a day dream, and, as it stands, it embodies my waking thoughts. It is with diffidence and hesitation that I have committed it to writing. My excuse must be that I was persuaded thereto by friends who heard me tell it, and were helped by it, and who believed it would be helpful to others. It is in that hope I send it forth. If through reading this little book even one is led to see in the coming of Emmanuel the "birthday of hope" for our sad and weary world, that will be sufficient reward for

THE AUTHOR.

“IF I HAD NOT COME”

“*THE time draws near the birth of Christ
The moon is hid ; the night is still
The Christmas bells, from hill to hill,
Answer each other in the mist.*

* * * * *

“*Rise, happy morn ; rise, holy morn ;
Draw forth the cheerful day from night ;
O Father, touch the East, and light
The light that shone when Hope was born.*”

—TENNYSON.

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HE time was drawing near the anniversary of the birth of Christ, and many a thing reminded me that Christmas was at the doors. There were sprigs of holly and mistletoe upon my mantelshelf. There were cards from friends near and far upon my desk. Through the windows there came faintly the sound of church bells practicing their Christmas chimes; while close at hand in the street below a band was playing, not perhaps in the most correct harmony, the grand old Christmas hymn, "O come, all ye faithful." Everything spoke of Christmas, and as I sat before my study fire that night

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my mind was full of thoughts of Bethlehem, and of the Little Child, and of the wonderful love and grace of God.

My New Testament was in my hands. I had opened it at random, and the chapter that met my gaze was the fifteenth chapter in the gospel written by the beloved Apostle. It was a familiar chapter. I could repeat its every verse. But there is always "more light and truth to break forth from God's Word," and I discovered something in that familiar chapter that night which I had never noticed before. I read quietly, mechanically almost, till I came to this little phrase: "If I had not come." I had never contemplated that possibility! What a terrible, awful "if"! "If I had *not* come." I could read no further. That "if" gripped me, it held me in a vice, and I could not escape from it. Sitting in front of a blazing fire I shivered and turned cold as I thought of that "if," and yet I could think of noth-

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ing else. "If Christ had not come—what?" My New Testament dropped upon my knees, and I began to dream of the Christless world—the world in which Bethlehem had no place, the world which had never heard the angels' song, the world which had never seen the star, the world into which the child of the manger had *not* come.

And this is what I saw in my dream.

I have said the time was drawing near the anniversary of the birth of Christ, and signs of the approach of Christmas were all about me. This was the first thing I noticed about the Christless world—*it was a world without a Christmas*. Christmas is a glad season. Every one welcomes it. It is welcome to parents because it brings the children together again under the dear old family roof. It is welcome to sons and daughters out in the world because it restores them for a brief space to father and mother and home. It is welcome to the

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little ones because on Christmas Eve Santa Claus comes, laden with good things, to pay his annual visit. It is welcome to the hard-pressed man of business because it brings with it an exchange of grinding toil for family and social joys. It is welcome to the poor and friendless because it brings to their sad hearts glad proof that they are not entirely forgotten and unloved. Take it all in all, Christmas is the gladdest, brightest, merriest season in the whole year.

But in the Christless world *there was no Christmas*. The 25th of December was no different from any other day in that dreary place.

I walked out into the streets. I noticed that business was being carried on just as usual. The stores were all open. The chimneys of factories and foundries poured out dense clouds of black smoke. All around me I could hear the whirr of machinery and the ordinary

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sounds of labour. I saw business men hurrying along, looking anxious and careworn and troubled. I listened for the usual hearty greetings, but I heard none. Men just gave a hasty nod or a curt "Good morning" to one another, and passed on. I listened for the Christmas bells, "answering each other through the mist." But not a single peal broke the silence of the air. And I marvelled to see the world so busy, so careworn, so joyless on this particular day, until I remembered it was a world into which He had not come, and in the Christless world there is no Christmas.

Christmas is a gladsome time in the home. But I walked into a home in this Christless world on the 25th of December, and I saw no signs of unusual rejoicing or gladness. I peeped into the rooms where the little ones slept, but I saw no tiny stockings hung up at the foot of the bed for Santa Claus to fill with good things. I looked into the

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parlour, but I saw no Christmas tree. I looked into the breakfast room, but I saw no presents on the table—all I saw was the father breakfasting in a great hurry in order to be in time for business. I wondered there was no eager expectation of the postman's knock—but I found that the postman had already called; he was as early as usual, and he had brought no Christmas Cards. I expected to find grown-up sons and daughters once again in the old home, but no absent son or daughter had come back. And again I wondered—no cards, no presents, no family gatherings, no holly, no mistletoe—until I remembered I was in a Christless world, and in the Christless world there is no Christmas.

Christmas is a gladsome time for the poor and needy. At this season, more than at any other, the rich, of their abundance, give to them that lack. Christmas creates sympathy between

man and man, and many who are hard and miserly enough at other times, catch the infection of generosity at this blessed season of the year. The result is, Christmas Day is the brightest day in the year for thousands and thousands of poor people, because multitudes of those who are better off seek to make the day happy for themselves by making it happy for others. So, full of expectation, I wandered on the morning of the 25th of December into the courts and alleys, where the poor spent their dull and monotonous lives. I opened the doors of their houses and looked in. But I was smitten to the heart with disappointment; for I saw no presents on the tables. I saw no little packets of tea, no parcels of provisions for the Christmas dinner. I saw no preparations for any unusual festivity. I saw no sign that the rich had been caring for the comfort of the poor. The 25th of December was as dull and dreary a

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day as any day in the twelvemonth. The fare on the table was scanty. The fire in the stove was the usual tiny spoonful. The children's faces were pinched and pale. And as I noticed this I wondered, and asked myself, "Where are all the little gracious and kindly gifts men and women offer to the poor and needy in order to brighten and gladden their Christmas?" until I remembered I was in a world into which He had not come, and in the Christless world is no Christmas.

Sick at heart, I dreamed that I turned my steps homeward, when in my walk I came to a sudden stop, for on one side of the street I noticed a great gap in the row of buildings. That vacant place bewildered me. I had never seen it before. I held my head and tried to think. Yes, certainly that was where St. Peter's Church used to stand. But it was there no longer. I ran to the next street, which contained the church

wherein I was wont to worship. That, too, had disappeared. I looked up to the crest of the hill, on which our great cathedral lay, like a giant eagle with its wings outstretched for flight. The hill-top was desolate and bare. Every tower and spire, every church and chapel, had clean gone. I held my breath for very wonder and amazement. I could not understand it, until I remembered I was in a world into which Christ had not come.

Nor were churches and chapels the only buildings that I missed. The prison in all its hideous ugliness was still there. But the Dispensary had gone, and the Hospital had vanished, and the Orphanage had disappeared. In this world I looked upon, I could see no care taken of the sick and dying. I could see no provision made for the orphan, the destitute, the fallen. I could see no pity for the poor. And again I marvelled to see a world so

hard, so cruel, so pitiless, until I remembered it was a Christless world—a world into which He had not come.

Then, I know not how or why, my attention was drawn to the men and women who passed by me in the streets. I thought I noticed signs of weariness and distress on their faces, and on looking closely I saw that all carried a burden upon their shoulders. And the burden seemed to crush them to the ground beneath its weight, and yet do what they would, they could not shake it off. One man as he passed I heard crying, "Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this dead body?" I wondered what this dreadful burden was, and then I saw it was the burden of sin each one was carrying. Then I marvelled exceedingly that men and women should continue to bear that crushing load. I asked myself why they did not do as Bunyan, in his immortal dream, makes Christian do. I

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wondered why they did not go up to the Cross, and then the burden would be loosed from their shoulders, and would fall from off their backs, and would tumble till it came to the mouth of the Sepulchre, into which it would fall, and they should never see it more. And I was on the point of crying out to them about the Cross and the blood shed for the remission of sins, when I remembered, with a shudder and a start, that in this world there was no Cross, and, therefore, no grave in which sin could be buried; that in this world there was no hope of pardon or release, but that sin was a burden men were forever doomed to carry, for the world I was looking upon was a Christless world—a world into which He had *not* come.

It was with a sigh of relief I escaped out of the streets, with their sights of wretchedness and woe, into the quiet of my own room. But I quickly found my disappointments and troubles were not

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at an end. For immediately on entering I saw changes had taken place. There were empty spaces in my bookshelves. Small gaps made by books withdrawn for use at the desk or lent to friends I was accustomed to. But these were not gaps of that kind, for whole rows of books had disappeared. I got up to see what had happened. I found every commentary I possessed on the New Testament had vanished. I took up my Bible, and found it ended at Malachi. The shelf on which I kept my "Lives of Christ" was bare, and I began to wonder what could have happened to these books of mine—the books I prized the most—until I remembered I was in a world into which *He* had not come, and the Christless world is a world without a New Testament, a world that knows nothing of the sweet story of the gospels.

But I comforted myself that I had many books still left. I looked to the

shelf where I kept my poets—my Shakespeare, my Milton, my Tennyson, my Browning! Yes, they were all there! I took up one of them just to assure myself—it happened to be a volume of Browning—and turned to some of my favourite passages. But my first glance at the book made me start with astonishment. The passages that had been my meat and drink had disappeared. There were the pencil marks at the side, but opposite them nothing but blank spaces. It seemed as if some one out of sheer wanton mischief had effaced the finest passages from every poem. Laying down my Browning, I hurriedly opened my Shakespeare. It was as I feared—the destroyer had been at work there also. I snatched up my Tennyson; my copy opened at "In Memoriam"—only fragments of the poem were left. Milton, I found, was mangled beyond recognition. I sat down before my books, dazed, and tried

to puzzle out what it meant. I tried to recall some of the missing passages. I remembered that "In Memoriam" began with the line, "Strong Son of God, Immortal Love." That line and the line that followed were missing. That gave me the clue. On looking again, I found that every line in the poets about Christ, and every line inspired by Christ, had disappeared. I was in a world without Christ, and with the taking away of my Lord, the half, and the noblest half, of my literature had been taken away also.

Then I looked away from my bookshelves to the walls of my room, and I found a picture missing. I had, over my mantelpiece, a picture that was valuable to me, not perhaps for its artistic merit, but for the way in which it used to speak to my soul. It was a picture of a Man clothed in the Eastern garb; His raiment was torn; His feet and hands were bleeding; His face was haggard and worn, and on His brow

the night dews had gathered. And in His arms He carried a sheep, and the worn face bent over that poor sheep with a smile of ineffable tenderness. The picture had written beneath it these words, "I am the Good Shepherd."

How often had I gazed upon that picture! It was always a joy, a comfort, an inspiration to me! When I grew weary in my work as under-shepherd, when the disappointments of the work were fretting me, I used to stand before the picture and think how He—the Good Shepherd—would go after the one lost sheep, "O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent," until He found it. I seemed to hear Him say to me, "I bore all this for thee, what hast thou done for Me," and I never looked up at the picture without being ashamed of my fretfulness and impatience, and gaining new inspiration and strength. But I looked, and the picture had vanished from its place. There was nothing but blank

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bare wall where once it hung. I wondered what had happened to it, until I remembered I was in a world into which He had not come, and in the Christless world there was no Good Shepherd; no one to give His life for the sheep; no one to go after the one lost sheep until He find it!

I sat in my chair before the fire brooding gloomily over my losses, when I heard the bell ring. Presently there came a tap at my door, and the maid entered with a message.

"Please, sir, a little girl down-stairs wants to see you."

I followed the maid down, and there in the hall stood a little child. The light was but dim, but even in that dim light I could see that the little one was in trouble of some kind, for her eyes were red and swollen with weeping.

"Please, sir," she said with a sob, as soon as she caught sight of me, "please,

sir, father's very ill, and we want you to come."

"Wait a moment, my child," I said, "and I will go back with you at once."

In a few minutes I was ready, and taking the child's hand we set out through the night together. She was but a wee child—but love gave her wings, and I had to walk my best to keep pace with her that night.

"There it is," she said at last, pointing to a house with that light in the upper windows that so often speaks of sickness. In a moment we were there, and the little one led me without delay straight into the sick room. Sickness is always pathetic, but how heart-breaking sickness can be I never realized till that night. There lay the patient in his agony—sick unto death, and around the bed stood his weeping wife and children. He turned great wistful eyes upon me and whispered, "Can you help me?"

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Now, I had visited many sick beds before, and had spoken to those in mortal pain of Jesus, and His pity and power; of God the Father and His boundless love; of heaven and the prepared place, and I knew these things had brought such comfort and strength and peace that men and women had gone down into the dark valley singing, and everlasting joy was upon their heads. So, remembering my past experiences, in response to the pathetic appeal of the dying man, I said,

"Yes, I think I can help you; let me read a few verses to you," and with that I put my hand in my pocket for the little Testament I always carry. I had not got it—I was in a Christless world. That discovery struck me dumb. I tried hard to speak—for the eyes of the man were fastened in mute appeal upon me—but what could I say? I could not discuss the weather or the markets. That is not what dying people want to

hear about. But I could speak no word of comfort.

"Can't you help me?" cried the dying man again, noticing my silence. No. I could not! I sat by that bedside dumb, with a feeling of helpless despair in my heart, for I had no Christ to speak about. I could not speak of His promises, so rich and gracious; I could not speak of His love, so free and tender; I could not speak of the help He gives to the weak, and the welcome He extends to the sinner; I could not speak of the hope of glory and the assurance of immortality. I was in the Christless world—a world into which He had not come. I sat there silent in face of a tragedy I could not avert, and a sorrow I could not comfort.

And in time the sufferer died, and there was wild grief and lamentation in that home. They sorrowed as those who have no hope. And in my dream I thought I followed with the mourners

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to the grave. A funeral is always sad enough. To say the last good-bye to a loved one is always hard. But I had been to funerals before, and mingled with our sorrow there was a glorious hope. Even though the tears were on our cheeks, and sobs well-nigh choked the voice, we had been able to say, "O Grave! where is thy victory? O Death! where is thy sting? Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." But this funeral was pure and unmitigated tragedy. There was no ray of light to cheer us in the darkness. There was no shred of hope to comfort us in our grief. As I stood by that open grave dull despair seemed to seize upon me. I opened my service book, but the passages I had been wont to read were all missing. There was no Christ—therefore I could not read, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." There was no Christ—therefore I could not read, "Let not your

heart be troubled. In My Father's house are many mansions, I go to prepare a place for you." There was no Christ—therefore I could not read, "To be with Christ is far better." There was no Christ—therefore I could not cry, "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory." I was dumb, and the coffin was lowered into that cold grave in silence, and the only words spoken, as a handful of earth was thrown upon the coffin lid, were those words that chill the heart, so full are they of the pathos and tragedy of mortality, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

And with that I awoke, to find the tears upon my cheek and a great sob in my throat; awoke to find this cruel, pitiless, Christless world was but a dream. For there were the sprigs of holly upon my mantel-shelf and the Christmas cards upon my desk, and through the frosty night came the sound of the band still playing, though at a greater distance

this time, the same hymn, "O come, all ye faithful." My books were all on their shelves; the Good Shepherd beamed mildly upon me from His usual place; the church spires outlined themselves sharply against the winter's sky, and my New Testament was upon my knee. And I thanked God the Christless world was but a dream. With deeper thankfulness than ever I blessed Him that on the first Christmas night, long years ago, there was born in the city of David a Saviour, which was Christ the Lord.

Yes, it was but a dream—an ugly, hideous dream; but it taught me to appreciate the inestimable gift bestowed upon our race at Bethlehem! We often fail to realize the value of things until we are deprived of them. We never understand how great a boon health is, until we are laid weak and helpless on a sick bed. We never realize how much of the sunshine and brightness of the home is due to the little child until the

little child's laughter and prattle are hushed forever. In exactly the same way I never knew how much the world owed to Jesus Christ until I dreamed of the world into which Christ had not come. The vision of that world without a Christmas, without a Church, without a Cross; the vision of that world without pity and without heart; the vision of that world in which life was misery and death despair—made me thank God I lived in a world into which Christ *had come*. I realized then that pity and sympathy and love and hope, the things that make life glad and beautiful, were born with Christ at Bethlehem.

And so when Christmas morning broke, bright and frosty and clear, my heart was full of Christmas joy. It was, verily, a "Merry Christmas" to me. The bells clashed out their gladsome peals, and they found an answering music in my soul. I went with the multitude to the house of God, with the voice

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of joy and praise—a multitude keeping holy day. With them I sang the old hymn :

“O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem ;
Come and behold Him,
Born the King of Angels ;
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.”

And with the humble shepherds and the wise men from the East, I too knelt at the rude manger-side, and worshipped the little Child, for in Him I had been taught to see God's unspeakable gift.

AT THE SIGN OF THE HEART

*BUT art Thou come, dear Saviour? Hath Thy
love*

Thus made Thee stoop, and leave Thy throne above.

*Thy lofty heavens, and thus Thyself to dress
In dust to visit mortals? Could no less*

*A condescension serve? and after all
The mean reception of a cratch and stall?*

*Dear Lord, I'll fetch Thee thence! I have a room
('Tis poor, but 'tis my best), if Thou wilt come*

*Within so small a cell, where I would fain
Mine and the world's Redeemer entertain:*

*I mean, my heart. 'Tis sluttish, I confess,
And will not mend Thy lodging, Lord, unless*

*Thou send before Thy harbinger, I mean
Thy pure and purging grace, to make it clean,*

*And sweep its nasty corners; then I'll try
To wash it also with a weeping eye.*

*And when 'tis swept and washed, I then will go,
And, with Thy leave, I'll fetch some flowers that
grow*

*In Thine own garden, Faith and Love, to Thee,
With these I'll dress it up, and these shall be*

*My rosemary and bays. Yet when my best
Is done, the room's not fit for such a Guest.*

*But here's the cure: Thy presence, Lord, alone
Will make a stall a court, a crown a throne.*

—ANON